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## ATHEISM IN COLLEGES.

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THE skepticism which has somewhat abated its force in Germany, and is at least stationary in France, is passing over England as a tidal wave of great breadth and force.

At no time in the history of the English nation has unbelief been so general or so deep-seated; nor has it ever before established itself on ground so various and so fundamental. The skepticism of to-day is not one primarily of criticism and of fault-finding, but one which belongs to the way in which the material world, in which man and humanity, are viewed. It implies great alteration in the rational outlook of men, and can be modified only by equally radical changes.

This unbelief has as yet met with more obstruction in America than in England, and cannot be said to have taken any large possession of the ruling thought among us. Our religious and philosophical defenses are by no means broken down, or even seriously breached. Any movement of this character that is at all general or vigorous is likely to show itself in our colleges, and to propagate itself by means of them. Educational seats are naturally centers of philosophical thought, and this thought it is which is immediately involved in unbelief. New views, wider and more just views,—so thought,—enlist nowhere more enthusiasm in adoption and extension than among young men in course of instruction. It is thus a question of great interest: How far is this unbelief finding its way into American colleges?

To answer this question wisely, we must understand the causes of this skepticism, more especially in its progress through England.

The present unbelief in England is no occasion of reasonable surprise. The preparation for it has extended through centuries. It is a perfectly normal result. The real thing to be explained

is, why these fruits of unbelief have not ripened sooner. A philosophy of sensationalism, materialism, skepticism, and agnosticism has formed the deepest and strongest current of English speculation. Atheism is the necessary upshot of such a line of thought. If the English mind had had the agility and freedom of the French mind, we should have seen long ago in England an age of encyclopedists. The English are so preëminently practical, are so ruled by social sentiment and precedent, that it has always been easy for men like Locke and Priestley to hold fast to religious faith while assiduously undermining it. The words materialist and atheist have ever been in England vigorous deterrents, no matter how justly applied. Englishmen have not been willing to be called what they really were, because the social sentiment and the speculative sentiment have had distinct and divided power. The philosophy of England, now dominant for more than two centuries, expresses the most fundamental ground of its unbelief. For all that time, speculation has been steadily disparaging the powers of rational insight and faith, and closing up the avenues to the spiritual world.

Agnosticism, though a denial of philosophy, an assertion of inability to reach ultimate truths, never for long retains this position. It soon begins to occupy the ground cleared with its own statements, and to turn ignorance into a system of skepticism. It is like a barbarous host that burns the palaces of Rome, and then pitches its tents among their ruins.

A philosophy of agnosticism, what can it issue in but atheism?

The thing to be explained is that this unbelief has broken out just now. The reason of this we find in science. Science is skeptical or believing, according to the philosophy with which it is associated. A vigorous science gives to a faithless philosophy boldness and positiveness of assertion. It carries over the value of its own work and the undoubted truth of its own conclusions to the affiliated speculations. This has been the state of things for years in England. Such men as Tyndall and Huxley, with high claims in science and no claims in philosophy, have brought the strength of the one great intellectual movement of our age into the service of unbelief. This union of the feeblest of philosophies with a stalwart science has been the parentage of current skepticism.

A third reason has also been operative. There has been a  
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keen perception of the failures of religious belief, and an unsparing criticism of them. It has been felt that indolent faith and an easy reception of the supernatural have cut men off from that very inquiry into law, and that obedience to it, on which social progress is conditioned. The dogmas of belief, instead of showing the progressive force of truth, its power to deepen and expand vision, have at times, in dogged reiteration, planted themselves directly in the way of progress.

We say nothing of the justness of identifying fundamental principles in the spiritual world with the phases they assume among men, and the faults of the persons who chance to defend them.

The merely practical man may well criticise the short-comings of persons and organizations; it belongs to philosophy to discern the interior force of ideas and their ultimate office. It has to do, not simply with what is, but with what may be. But, narrow as this critical method is, it has always been prevalent and effective. A good deal of bitter skepticism only expresses the censure called out by a formal and ineffectual faith. Witness the unsparing arraignment of Protestantism by Frederic Harrison, in the October number of the "Nineteenth Century."

These being the general conditions of the prevalent atheism, we direct our attention to the way in which they affect American colleges. In these colleges the Scotch philosophy, as offered by Stewart and Hamilton, is more frequently taught than any other. This philosophy stands in dogmatic opposition to English sensationalism, though profoundly affected by it. It does not fully trust or give clear explanation of those rational powers by which mind rises beyond the world of sensible impressions into that of spiritual truths. This philosophy, however, resisting on its dogmatic side the skepticism of materialism, offers a temporary support to faith. The foundations of belief in our American colleges, though not entirely well and thoroughly laid, are able to resist, at least for a time, the agnostic attacks which English philosophy has cherished. Moreover, the science of this country, in the hands of such men as Professors Gray, Dana, Henry, has not generally added to itself a destructive speculation, prompting perpetual efforts at the solution of the ultimate problems of philosophy, the existence of matter and mind, their nature and dependence, with the theistic questions which accompany these inquiries.

Philosophy is taught with moderate success in our colleges, and the final results of belief must depend largely on the form which it shall hereafter assume, and the force it shall display. If we secure vigorous life in this direction, we have nothing to fear; if we cannot, the gods themselves cannot help us. A profounder philosophy, a philosophy that takes root within itself, this is the demand of higher education, as it is the demand of higher thought. The English mind has striven to draw the supply of its spiritual life so long out of the dry roots of sensationalism, hidden in the works of Locke, Hume, Hartley, Mill, and Spencer, that it can no longer resist any wind of doctrine, no matter how destructive it may be.

There is a diverse moral attitude in different American colleges, turning somewhat upon size. Size is itself a modifying force of considerable moment, and is connected with the presence of other influences of still more moment. Most American colleges are under some definite form of religious faith, and look to some one denomination for their chief support. It is comparatively easy to establish and to maintain in a vigorous type the prevailing temper of an institution, if the institution is small. As it increases in numbers, this effort becomes more and more difficult. The restricted tendencies are broken in on in a growing variety of ways.

There is also a strong natural selection in these well-defined colleges, exercised toward the students who attend on them. They gather their own by an extended moral attraction. This elective force becomes weaker as the college increases in power, and more general influences take its place.

When an institution achieves a national reputation and position, it attracts to itself professors of varied ability and marked power. Ambitious and progressive minds are drawn toward it. The result is a much greater variety of spirit in its professors, and less willingness to subordinate their methods and conclusions to any prevailing view. Talent becomes a leading consideration, and talent is restive, and more or less eccentric. It is impossible, therefore, in a large and popular institution, to bind instruction in any close way to any definite religious result.

The students of such institutions are not only gathered from all classes; wealth is a more common possession with them. The necessary, and still more the incidental, expenses of the larger colleges are greater than those of the smaller ones. There is

probably no one external circumstance that so reduces both intellectual and moral force among young men as the possession of wealth. An institution, one-half or two-thirds of whose students are wealthy, is likely to be characterized by an easy-going temper, notwithstanding the brilliant exceptions it may offer.

A singularly striking confirmation of these facts is presented in a recent statement coming from the American Board of Foreign Missions. Perhaps no organization in the world is making to-day a more pure, vigorous, and unexceptionable effort to disseminate theism in its Christian form than the American Board. Of the one hundred and thirty-nine missionaries in its employment who are graduates, thirty were graduated by Amherst and one by Harvard; twenty-two by Williams and fifteen by Yale,—in the period covered, Yale had some four times the number of students at Williams,—eleven by Beloit, and one or more\* by Michigan University.

There are two kinds of skepticism, one of which is more frequently met with in the larger, and the other in the smaller colleges. There is a skepticism of spiritual weakness, which arises from the slow undermining of personal faith and a distinct moral life. This is the skepticism which is most prevalent in the larger institutions. It is not often demonstrative, for it has not sufficient force of conviction. If it becomes boisterous, the animus of the impulse is likely to be a reckless immoral feeling. This form is doubtless most to be dreaded in a long period, as indicating a decay of spiritual powers. In the smaller institutions, the skepticism that ventures to show itself is likely to be more bitter, to spring from direct antagonism to current forms of faith in some of their manifestations, or from a philosophy borrowed in an empirical way from science. So far as this form of unbelief exists in larger institutions, not being subjected to contradiction or pressure, it easily unites with the first form.

This evil of disbelief, which is not as yet, in any sense, formidable in American colleges, is to be regretted, first and foremost, because of its immediate relations to spiritual truths, and secondly, because of its connection with morals. The fundamental inquiry is: What is the truth in the premises? A skepticism that compels us to lay more broadly, more clearly, more consciously, the foundations of faith is not altogether to be deprecated. We have occasion to be alarmed only when the

\* The report is not sufficiently definite to decide the point.

destructive processes so exceed the constructive ones as to leave the minds of men for a period devastated and waste.

Existing agnosticism is a rhythmical swing of the human mind, sure to find compensation in due time. Like all blind tendencies, it should be restrained, modified, and put to service. This can be done only by a more clear assertion of the correlative truths of spiritual powers. The nature of man settles the limits of all knowledge, and to maintain a sensational, materialistic, or empirical philosophy of any phase for any considerable period, and not to encounter the accompanying agnosticism passing over into atheism, is impossible. It is worth recollecting that Amherst and Williams have been marked for a long period by peculiarly vigorous instruction in psychology.

Philosophy, in spite of its difficulties, in spite of its fruitless discussions and its manifold errors, can alone settle the limits of knowledge and the nature and authority of its various forms. To deny philosophy is, under the deceptive appearance of agnosticism, to make way for one of the feeblest and most self-contradictory forms of philosophy, with the added evil that it does not know itself by, and is not known by, its true name.

Philosophy is the only remedy for philosophy, the only remedy for skepticism, itself a philosophy. The appeal is to reason, and from this appeal there is no escape. Revelation affords no refuge. Dogma is no defense, but a portion of the danger rather. It will be felt by many that the evil stated in this form is vague, and the remedy still more so. Men love specifics, only their specifics turn out to be no specifics, and they are thrown back on the great current of events, flowing darkly on under general laws. This difficulty of unbelief, so far as it is a difficulty, is in men's thoughts, and there it must be encountered.

But atheism is also especially to be deprecated from its relation to morality. The danger at this point is somewhat less real and much less urgent than it has often been thought to be.

Religion is not so much the foundation of morals, as morals the foundation of religion. Though we have often an absolute denial of the first truths of religion, we have no such denial of those of morals. Indeed, the unbeliever, more often than otherwise, takes pains to prove that the grounds of ethical conviction remain with him undisturbed. While this is hardly true, it is plainly not true that morality immediately shares the fate of religion. A complete view of our moral nature leads us to faith;

but the grand facts of that nature remain, and must receive some sort of interpretation, no matter how extended our unbelief. Moreover, much the larger portion of enforcement in morals does not spring from pure moral insight, but from the conventional vigor which certain principles of action have acquired. While, therefore, religion furnishes the strongest incentives to upright action, it by no means furnishes all the incentives, and public morals may remain for a considerable period without material alteration in a time of general skepticism. To tear away the superstructure of religious belief is to uncover the foundations of morality, but not to remove them; is to expose them to wasting away, but is not itself to subvert them. It is as vain, however, to expect that agnosticism will not in the end modify morality, as it was to expect, during the long years in which it was ripening, that a philosophy of sensationalism would not prove destructive to faith.

Practical morals do not follow so immediately on the fortunes of speculative truth as to make the danger of unbelief imminent in this direction. Yet, the slowness of the movement renders it only the more difficult to regain any ground that is once lost. As are our beliefs as to our own nature and destiny, will ultimately be our action. These are the two lines of development that are being brought into harmony by all forces, speculative and practical. It would be difficult at present, except hesitatingly in single cases, to refer any immorality in our American colleges to unbelief.

In an exigency of this sort, arising from a threatened waywardness of speculative inquiry, great scope of vision and much wisdom are called for. The facts must be accepted and shaped, rather than denied and pushed back.

The skepticism of our time includes a wholly legitimate line of action; even more than this, it is incident to the highest exercise of our powers. No repression and no resentment are in order. We have quietly assumed in our discussion that our own faith is correct, and that the faithlessness of atheism is weakness and error.

While our language fittingly proceeds under this form, the discussion involved is not itself to be waived in any of its branches, or approached in any dogmatic spirit. Much existing unbelief is a just reaction against irrational pressure, is an assertion of individual freedom. While we would not deny a certain authority

to instruction, we would deprecate authoritative instruction in our higher institutions as any remedy for existing or approaching atheism.

The evil is intellectual, and admits only of an intellectual remedy. It is a weakness of philosophy, and the breach in the dike must be repaired where it exists. Truth is just as capable of eliciting enthusiasm among young men to-day as ever before, but it must be simple truth, that is offered in its own light. The captivating force of the empirical speculations of existing philosophy is due to the apparent proffer of fresh and aggressive truths.

If we cannot waive free discussion, much less can we expect to huddle young men into sheep-folds, and to make no provision for higher education except in institutions of definite and pronounced faith.

Churches of all sorts will do well to remember, constantly, that they cannot maintain their own life except in open, breezy conflict, nor can they maintain the spiritual life of their own young men on easier terms. Veterans are made only for the open field. The notion that the Christian Church is to monopolize and manipulate education is antique for our time and for all time. This principle is most unfortunate for the churches themselves; we are not to draw back from inquiry, simply because we cannot control it, simply because it is inquiry. A confidence in truth, and a free and quick exposure of it to all the hazards of war, are the only available and the only sound policy.

We are also not to strive to identify morality with religious belief. While within our own circle we may constantly support action by the whole scope of reason, it is folly to deny or to pull down any of the more narrow foundations of society. Indeed, these foundations are in part what the rational edifice of enlarged spiritual life is, in a truly spiritual evolution, being built upon. When we cannot work with men by virtue of later and larger convictions, it is well to get back to the primary and rudimentary—rudimentary in human history—principles at which many ways meet. We should be glad that the social world does not collapse while our special theory of it is under discussion.

We are to defend ourselves in this conflict with unbelief by precipitating it rather than by postponing it. We shall do this best in our colleges by providing professors able and active to the pitch of our times in their own departments, and men who are large minded and earnest.

Timid or illogical leadership will not long defend our young men from unbelief, and will make the danger extreme when it comes. Herein is included the fundamental principle, that the vigorous mind is not to be hoodwinked or narrowed in any way, and that we are not to have any undue anxiety to lead it to any one conclusion. Our safety will be found in many leaders and much discussion.

Every able instructor inevitably pushes hard enough the minds he encounters. We should be jealous of the integrity of the mental processes of the student, for we wish him to show this integrity in the actual encounters of the world.

Above all, it is in order to recognize the trend of our times, the immense reaction that is on us, and not be driven by it. Mind, as a power of thought, and philosophy as a means to the deepest insight, have suffered and are suffering every form of disparagement. A current philosophy calls itself positive which is primarily made up of negations; and a faith of agnosticism is struggling into being which implies a penetration into the very substance of things, and the innermost laws of progress.

It is time that we should call things by their right names once more, and should be able to see that those who laugh at metaphysics do it only as a means of introducing it in its most unverified conclusions.

So far as we have supreme confidence in any remedy of unbelief, it is found in a bold, patient, extended discussion of the grounds of belief, where they alone are found, in the nature of mind. No matter what have been our failures, we have still to encounter the untiring waves, strong in the faith that we are approaching undiscovered lands hidden below the horizon.

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